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Don't Leave Seniors Behind!

Submitted by Benton Foundation on behalf of Cecilia Garcia, Bob Harootyan on March 21, 2013
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March 21, 2013 – Today marks the beginning of a major campaign to bridge the digital divide. “[Everyone On](#)” is the public service arm of [Connect2Compete](#) (C2C), a national public/private partnership that hopes to provide Internet access, digital literacy training and refurbished computers to low-income consumers. Sounds like a great idea, given how essential digital communications have become in how we live and work in the 21st Century. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was a driving force behind the launch of C2C because the commission recognized the need for a strong collaborative partnership with industry, the nonprofit sector and government to make sure everyone in this nation, regardless of age or income, is able to reap the benefits from access to affordable broadband networks. Other nations have recognized this and, as a result, higher percentages of their citizens are connected and trained to make full use of the technology. So, for that reason, kudos to C2C and its extensive network of partners. There's just one problem – for efficiency, C2C targets low-income families whose children are eligible for the federal free and reduced-cost lunch programs. That means that low-income seniors, a highly vulnerable segment of the population, are being left behind.

According to the [Pew Internet & American Life Project](#), Internet use by people age 65 and older grew from 41 percent in 2010 to 54 percent in 2012. That's good news, but seniors remain far behind the 82 percent of all adults who are Internet users. And digging a bit deeper, significant numbers of low-income seniors do not have computers or broadband access at home. Digital literacy, which is critical for meaningful use of the Internet, is least prevalent among seniors who are less-educated, have lower incomes and are people of color. Moreover, like all non-users, older adults often cite *lack of relevance* as a major reason for not using the Internet. Clearly, the nation needs some kind of intervention to help seniors get online, especially those with low income and limited education. While efforts like C2C essentially ignore this older segment of the population, organizations like [Senior Service America, Inc.](#) (SSAI) recognize that older adults do not have to be stranded on the wrong side of the digital divide. SSAI runs the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), the only federally-funded employment and training

assistance program for low-income older Americans. In 2010 SSAI launched its [Digital Inclusion Initiative](#) (DII), through which SCSEP participants have helped more than 25,000 seniors understand how (and why) to use the Internet. SSAI mobilized its network of SCSEP grantees to create nearly 350 community-based public sites that provide free computer coaching sessions for seniors. The learners utilize the self-paced [Generations on Line](#) computer tutorial application and receive one-on-one assistance from SCSEP participants who are trained Peer Coaches.

SSAI learned a great deal from the DII. The Peer Coaches reported that the biggest challenges were helping older learners get past their lack of confidence in the ability to use a computer and their “computer anxiety.” One-on-one coaching in a highly supportive group setting was essential to help allay these fears. The DII’s “open entry/open exit” structure and tutorial approach allowed the seniors to learn at their pace, rather than through a traditional classroom “lesson plan” structure.

It is also significant that the senior learners gained more than computer skills. SSAI’s survey data show that seniors who completed the DII program reported improved morale and attitudes about life. For example, the percentage of participants who said they are “very satisfied” with their life grew from 18.3% in their first coaching session to 29.7% after their final session. Most striking were the attitudinal changes among the learners who initially were the most pessimistic. Two examples: Of those who were initially the most pessimistic about “feeling useful,” 65 percent had a more positive response at the end of their DII experience. Similarly, of the learners who were initially the most pessimistic about “my life has a sense of purpose,” 69 percent had a more positive response after *their* final coaching session.

The point here is that older Americans – who suffer the most from the digital divide – are highly capable of learning to use the Internet and feel better when they do. The comfortable and supportive learning environment exemplified by the DII leads to remarkable improvements in morale and outlook on life. SSAI and other organizations that work with and on behalf of older Americans are helping us understand ways to address broadband adoption challenges for our most vulnerable populations. This is a win-win for everyone, yet such efforts do not get the same attention and support as Connect2Compete. Why not? There are straightforward ways to target the most disadvantaged elders, as is done with the subsidized school lunch program for children. A good place to start would be the millions of disadvantaged seniors who receive government rental housing subsidies, LIHEAP, SSI, and SNAP. The numbers and the need are clear.

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